DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 281 118 CG 019 852

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TITLE Similarity of Personality Attributes for "Best Friends" of Lonely Students.
PUB DATE Aug 86
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (94th, Washington, DC, August 22-26, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; *Friendship; Higher Education; *Interpersonal Competence; *Loneliness; *Psychological Patterns; *Self Esteem; *Social Desirability

ABSTRACT

Loneliness seems to be a significant clinical problem in American society and a nearly universal experience. If friends of lonely persons are themselves lonely and, hence, reinforce ineffective interpersonal styles or fail to model normative social behaviors, they may perpetuate a cycle of increasing loneliness. A study was conducted to explore personality attributes of the best friends of persons identified as state-, trait-, or non-lonely by scores on the Revised University of California at Los Angeles Loneliness Scale. It was hypothesized that best friends of college students would score similarly to their friends on measures of loneliness, social desirability, and self-confidence. Forty-eight undergraduate students and their same-sex friends completed measures of social desirability, self-confidence, and two versions of the loneliness scale. Findings support the hypothesis that the personality data of subjects' best friends would be similar to those of their own subject group. One implication of these results is that loneliness may be maintained, in part, by the choosing of friends who possess similar personality attributes. (Author/NB)

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SIMILARITY OF PERSONALITY ATTRIBUTES FOR "BEST FRIENDS" OF LONELY STUDENTS

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Abstract

This study explored personality attributes of the "best friends" of persons identified as "state", "trait", or "non-" lonely by scores on the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell et al., 1978). Forty-eight undergraduate students and their same-sex friends completed measures of social desirability, self-confidence, and two versions of the loneliness scale. Findings supported the hypothesis that the personality data of subjects' best friends would be similar to those of their own subject group. One implication of such results is that loneliness may be maintained, in part, by the choosing of friends who possess similar personality attributes.

Title: Similarity of Personality Attributes for "Best Friends" of Lonely Students

Subject Index Term: 32 Personality

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Similarity of Personality Attributes for "Best Friends" of Lonely Students

Loneliness seems to be a significant clinical problem in our society and a nearly universal experience (Chelune, Sultan, & Williams, 1980; Fromm Reichmann, 1959; Sermat, 1980; Sullivan, 1953; and Weiss, 1973). One large scale survey found that a majority of Americans has experienced loneliness at one time or another, with 15% experiencing loneliness all the time (Rubenstein & Shaver, 1981). Correlates of loneliness include depression, anxiety, hopelessness and alienation (Horowitz & French, 1979; Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980: Russell, Peplau & Ferguson, 1978), as well as drug abuse, alcoholism, and suicide (Wenz, 1977).

Loneliness can be parsimoniously defined as a self-perceived cognitive, emotional and behavioral response to the absence of satisfactory emotional relationships (Peplau & Perlman, 1979). Although the factors which contribute to

loneliness are many, a recent emphasis upon social skills deficits suggests that an exploration of the ongoing relationships of lonely persons might prove illuminating. If friends of lonely persons are themselves lonely and, hence, reinforce ineffective interpersonal styles or fail to model normative social behaviors, they might perpetuate a cycle of increasing loneliness.

The present study explored personality attributes of the "best friends" of persons identified as "state", "trait" or "non-" lonely by scores on the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell et al., 1978). Specifically, it was hypothesized that the "best friends" of college students would score similarly to their friends on measures of loneliness, social desirability and self-confidence. College students have been identified as a group likely to be experiencing a particularly difficult transitional developmental stage, of which the primary task is to establish new sets of social relationships (Cutrona, 1982). A "state" and "trait" distinction for loneliness was employed to clarify inconsistencies in the literature regarding the social behaviors and evaluations of lonely persons by others. One explanation of such inconsistencies is that the lonely may not be a homogeneous group of individuals. That is, persons from one lonely subgroup, i.e., the "trait lonely" may chronically withdraw or avoid social situations, possibly

because they do not have the appropriate skills to function effectively in such situations. Those of another group, the "state lonely", may attribute their feelings to temporary situational circumstances and, thus, manifest attitudes and behaviors similar to the nonlonely. That is, state lonely persons may be more likely than their trait lonely counterparts to approach social situations and to more appropriately adapt their behaviors to those of a partner. The hypothesis that the best friends of lonely individuals would score similarly to the subject groups on selected measures of personality is consistent with the phenomenon observed by Berscheid and Walster (1978) that relationships are most likely to be achieved with those individuals who are like oneself.

Subjects

Over 300 undergraduate students in introductory psychology courses were screened for participation in this study. Forty-eight subjects were selected on the basis of their responses to the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell et al., 1980). Students completed two versions of the scale, administered in random order, which differed only in their instructional content: a situational or "state" measure (UCLA-S) indicated how the respondent had felt during the past week, and a measure of chronicity (UCLA-T) indicated participants' typical or "trait" feelings.

Distributions of the scores for both forms of the loneliness measure were utilized to determine the three groups of subjects as follows:

Nonlonely subjects (NL) scored greater than one standard deviation below the mean for both situational and trait loneliness.

Situationally/state lonely (SL) subjects scored greater than one standard deviation above the mean on the situational measure only and below the mean on the trait measure.

Chronically/trait lonely (TL) subjects scored one standard deviation above the mean on both the situational and trait loneliness measures.

The breakdown of subjects was as follows: 18 trait lonely subjects included 10 females, 10 state lonely subjects included six females, and 20 nonlonely subjects included 11 females. Thus, while the number of females to males slightly favored females, this proportion was similar across groups. Because there were no significant differences between the sexes on the loneliness scale scores, and due to the small sample size in at least one of the groups, data from both sexes were combined for the remainder of the analyses.

Procedure

Following screening based on loneliness scores, subjects were contacted and their participation requested for a study in social interaction. They were asked, as a condition for

participation, to bring one same-sex "best friend" with them who would participate as well. Upon arrival at the testing site, both designated subjects and their friends were asked to complete measures of social desirability (Crowne and Marlowe, 1964), self-confidence (Shrauger, 1986), and both versions of the UCLA measure.

Results

Analyses indicated that subject selection for state, trait and nonlonely subjects on the basis of UCLA scores was effective as planned. A posteriori comparisons using the Newman-Keuls procedure for the UCLA-T indicated that all groups were significantly different from one another ($p=.05$) such that SL subjects perceived themselves as significcantly less lonely in their typical experience than their TL counterparts but significantly more lonely than NL subjects.

Support was obtained for the hypothesis that the personality data of subjects' "best friends" would be similar to their respective subject group on measures of loneliness, social desirability, and self-confidence. Comparisions of between-group differences by single factor analyses of variance yielded significant differences between best friends for the UCLA-S measure only, $F(2,42)=3.44$, $p=.04$, and a trend for differences with the trait loneliness measure, $F(2,42)=3.15$, $p=.053$. A posteriori comparisons using the Newman-Keuls procedure indicated that SL best friends were

more lonely on both measures than friends of either TL or NL groups, although differences between the groups failed to achieve significance at the .05 level.

Between-group comparisions for social desirability and self-confidence by single factor analyses of variance yielded significant effects for the subject groups such that mean scores for social desirability were lowest for the SL group, but significantly different only from the NL group. Scores for best friends followed this same pattern, i.e., SL friends were lowest and NL friends highest for social desirability, although these differences failed to reach significance, $F(2,42)=1.14$.

For self-confidence the NL subjects scored significantly higher than either the TL or SL groups, $p=.05$. Similarly, NL friends scored highest in self-confidence although SL friends scored lower than their TL counterparts. Again, these differences failed to reach significance, $F(2,42)=.78$. Also, t-tests showed no significant differences between scores on the Marlowe-Crowne for subjects and their friends for any of the loneliness groups. For self-confidence, both TL and SL subjects were less self-confident than their friends, the relationship for the latter tending toward signifiance, $t=2.26$, $p=.04$, and $t=1.95$, $p=.08$, respectively.

Conclusions

The findings of this study support the hypothesis that

subjects in a college student sample and their "best friends" score similarly in self-report measures of loneliness. Likewise, subjects and their friends scored similarly to one another on measures of social desirability and self-confidence. One implication of such results is that loneliness may be maintained, in part, by lonely persons choosing of friends who possess similar personality attributes. From a treatment perspective, these findings suggest that techniques such as social skills training may be most effective if directed at the development of ongoing relationships into more intimate relationships rather than at the initiation of new relationships.

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